Farming history: 98 years young, Elmo Snelling carries on

Texan Elmo Snelling, 98 years young, is a piece of living farm history.

Ron Smith 1 | Apr 15, 2013

Elmo Snelling has no plans to retire. This spring he's working on his 67th crop and on a cold, blustery day in early April that promised but never quite delivered much-needed rainfall, he was making plans to go into nearby Plainview, Texas, to order fertilizer for his cotton.

His energy belies his 98 years. He'll turn 99 July 27 and plans to drive a restored 1946 John Deere tractor in the Hale Center July 4th parade several weeks before that.

He pulls an ottoman up close to the sofa where the interviewer sits and explains that he sees well but has a bit of a hearing problem. He has no trouble, however, recalling events of his long career in farming.

"I've done everything from plowing horses to flying an airplane," he says. "And two years ago I put in drip irrigation. I've seen a move from pulling cotton to using the cotton strippers we have today. I still enjoy life and am grateful for each day the good Lord gives me."

He's still on the farm every day but doesn't work as many acres as he once did. "I'm the only one I have to satisfy," he says. "I wouldn't want to farm the whole place anymore. I'd mess that up pretty good, but I still enjoy getting out on the tractor."

He likes to watch things grow. "I enjoy watching green things go from emergence to harvest. It's fascinating to me to see that little seed that God put the germ of life in and watch the plant grow. It's a good thing to observe."

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He farms three pivot corners on fields where his sons, Wayne and Allen, farm the bulk of the acreage. He installed drip irrigation on two of those corners to increase productivity. He hopes to make from three to four bales of cotton per acre. "But I have to make two bales before I can make three and I have to make three before I can make four. Some people talk about making four or five bales an acre. Some even shoot for higher yields than that, but if I can make four bales I'll be the happiest man in Hale County. I'll let it make what it will make and be happy with it."

But he's still working to push production up where he can.

He put in the drip systems just two years ago. "I still have a lot to learn about drip irrigation," he says.

He has drip on two of the three pivot corners he works. The drip tape installer cut the water line and "eliminated me from getting water to that other corner," he says. He repaired some of the drip lines that were not properly installed.

First crop in 1946

He was disappointed in last year's crop and thinks changes in fertilization and variety may have been reasons. He put some of his fertilizer through the system and it did not work as well as he expected. "I'll go back to applying fertilizer before planting this year," he says. He also plans to switch back to FiberMax cotton. He tried another brand last year and was not pleased. "FiberMax has been a good variety for years, and I really had no good reason to change."

Snelling has farmed through some long dry spells since he made his first crop back in 1946. He takes dry weather in stride. "I don't recall a lot of hardship from the 1950-era drought. I just plant like it's going to rain every day. You just have to take the weather the good Lord gives you."

He's irrigated since he started farming in Hale County. "We used to row water, and it is a lot easier to punch a button than to move pipe.

"This is not dryland crop country," he says. "If I wanted to farm dryland I'd go back to Tillman County, Okla., but they've been suffering with drought the last few years, too. I'm thankful that I cast my lot out here."

Snelling worked on a farm long before he started out on his own, working for his father and grandfather on a farm near Frederick, Okla. He recalls his grandfather bringing in a pair of Percheron horses to the farm. "I harnessed the horses first thing in the mornings. My grandfather never owned a tractor," he recalls.

"I was the farmer. I mowed hay and raked it. After I got it raked we came in with a buck rake and

brought it to the baler, (another implement propelled by original horse power).

“I pitched a lot of bales up in the barn loft.”

He chuckles as he says that at the time he thought he might be “a little too young for that job. I got weaker and wiser,” he says.

He also remembers shocking grain with a hired hand and then being offered the opportunity to drive the tractor. “I said I could do it, and I cut square corners, just like the tractor driver had done. I thought it (driving the tractor) was easier than shocking.”

They brought the shocked oats to the thresher and then stored the grain in bins.

He put up oats in the loft. “We had to scoop the oats into the loft and then scoop them into the bin. I was very happy to get my first grain augur.”

Mr. Snelling jokes about looking for easy ways to get things done but he never shied away from hard work.

He attended several schools from first grade through high school—in Oklahoma and Texas. His father worked for Gulf Oil and moved often. He graduated mid-year from high school and enrolled mid-year in Cameron College at Lawton, Okla., then moved on to what was Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (Oklahoma State University since about 1955).

Possum Kingdom

He worked his way through, getting up every day at 4:30 to work in a dairy plant in downtown Stillwater. “I could do that and still make my 8 o’clock class,” he says. “I also worked on Saturdays.”

He earned his degree in animal husbandry. “I’m about as far away as you can get from that degree,” he says. “I don’t have cow one on the place. I did have a herd of about 90 at one time but decided I would do better with just crops instead of crops and cattle.”

After graduation he worked for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration as a performance supervisor. He also worked with the Veterans Agriculture Program in Hollis, Okla.

He spent some time in the oil industry, too, doing everything from running pipes to cleaning out drill stems on the derricks.

He started farming in Hollis and says he got his start from a farmer he worked with through the AAA. “He let me have some acreage to make wheat. That good wheat crop got me started,” he says.

He farmed in Hollis, on his wife’s grandfather’s place, for a while and then noticed when visiting his sisters in Petersburg, Texas, “how fat the grain sorghum heads were. We pooled our resources and bought a place in Hale County. Dad came out too and bought a section near Plainview.”

For a short time he farmed in Hollis, Okla., and Hale County, Texas, flying back and forth to take care of the farm work and then getting back to Hollis for the Veterans Ag Program.”

His brother-in-law managed an airport and gave him access to planes as he needed them.

Snelling says he learned to fly around 1938, and stuck with it until he bought a boat and learned to water ski.

“We had a place down at Possum Kingdom, and we would go down and ski and then come back tired to the farm,” says.

He’s seen a lot of changes since he started farming on his own in 1946. The most important, he says, has been the improvements in cotton varieties, especially adding herbicide tolerance. “That change made it possible for farmers to add acreage and manage them effectively,” he says.

He was also instrumental in testing Treflan. “I helped organize the weed management district in Hale County, and we got some Treflan for test plots. We experimented with it and found it to be a great, great help. The ingenuity of man has been amazing.”

Always busy

He likes cotton, but says he's always liked to diversify. "I raised mostly cotton and grain sorghum. I used to grow corn, too, but decided I was selling water too cheap. I haven't grown any corn in about 15 years. I like corn. We got it in and out early. It's a good crop to grow but it has to have a lot of water; it does not tolerate dryland like cotton or grain sorghum will. The short-season hybrids we have today would do better."

He says Hale County is good cotton country. "Cotton is a good plant for this country, and I'll stay with it for at least one more year."

Cotton still presents challenges but the process is "vastly different from when we had to take the cotton to the gin and wait to drive it in. We were responsible for the cotton, even at night, until we got it loaded. Things have changed a lot from pulling cotton to the way we harvest and manage it now. I never did pull much cotton. I don't think I would have made a very good living at it, but I have weighed many a sack of cotton."

He's always stayed busy and involved.

He was one of the first presidents of the Hale County Farm Bureau and recalls being courted by the upstart Farmers' Union to change allegiance. He says he had taken on a responsibility with Farm Bureau and would not have been comfortable leaving for another organization.

He's also restored several old tractors and various pieces of farm machinery over the years. He has the first turning plow he ever owned, restored, in his front yard. "I had to cut roots out of the wheels to move it," he says. He has restored a John Deere tractor that "had a tree growing through it. I had to cut the tree and then move the tractor."

Snelling has many other tractors, implements and two old cars, one a Cadillac, either in his barns or around the farm yard in various stages of restoration or disrepair. One steel-wheeled tractor dates back to the 1920s. "I'll never do anything with that one," he says.

He pointed out another John Deere, '40s era tractor that is mostly restored but parked in a shed and surrounded by other implements, parts, boxes and other memorabilia. "That tractor will never

move from here," he says.

His "every day" tractor is a 1980 Allis-Chalmers with a restored Cummings diesel engine. He expects to make another cotton crop with it.

Elmo Snelling makes no predictions about making a crop in 2013. He has yield goals but understands the vagaries of weather and other elements beyond his control. "I'll plant a crop this year," he says and laughs. "I'll do something, even if I do it wrong. I plan to grow cotton and plant the pivot corners. I may not plant that one dry corner if it doesn't rain, but might let it go to summer fallow or plant some soil-building, dryland crop."

Farming "is still a challenge," he says. "But I will continue to do the best I can.

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